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VIRGINIA TO TEST EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Annual Statewide Drill Set for End of October

(RICHMOND, Va.)—With Hurricane Katrina reminding the entire country of the importance of emergency preparedness, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is sponsoring a five-state exercise to test emergency planning efforts. Virginia will partner with Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia to test and evaluate response efforts during a mock exercise on Oct. 24 through Oct. 27 in the western areas of the state.

VDH's Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management routinely coordinate and conduct exercises to evaluate emergency response plans and procedures. This year's event, called OctoberTEST, will not only test localities, agencies and hospitals on how well they work together to respond to a series of fictional emergency public health events, but it will also assess the ability to work across state lines.

"The importance of these types of exercises has even more resonance in light of the lessons learned in responding to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina," said State Health Commissioner Robert. B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. "We know that it is imperative for Virginia's emergency response agencies to not only be able to work with each other, but also to reach out to neighboring states when large-scale emergencies overwhelm local response capabilities."

This year's drill will focus on a series of simulated disease outbreaks which will escalate into a full-scale, multi-state response to a suspected act of bioterrorism. Participants will combine table-top sessions with actual demonstrations such as mock victims entering hospitals and health department offices to report symptoms, mock media arriving to cover the developments, and the staging of mass dispensing sites to deliver medicines to the exposed populations.

"Our goal during these exercises is to treat this as an actual event where people are getting ill and dying," said Lisa G. Kaplowitz, M.D., M.S.H.A, VDH's Deputy Commissioner for Emergency Preparedness and Response. "We're not just playing a game during this week, we're acting out life and death situations so that our emergency response community will be prepared if we ever have to face a bioterrorism or disease outbreak event in the Commonwealth."

In order for participants to demonstrate real-world responses, they will know little in advance of the exercise about the issues they will face. Facilitators in the OctoberTEST exercise control center will interject changing conditions and manipulate variable factors to test responders' flexibility and communications.

(more)

Some of the OctoberTEST exercise participants in Virginia include:

- Virginia Department of Health
- Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services
- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- General Injectibles and Vaccines of Bastion, Va.
- Virginia National Guard (Virginia Defense Force)
- Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs
- Virginia Department of Emergency Management
- Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
- Virginia Highlands Community College
- Virginia Hospital and Health Care Association
- Virginia State Police
- Winchester Police Department
- 32 hospitals

For more information about VDH's Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov.

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Editors Note: VDH invites actual media to cover this exercise. Actual media locations available for this exercise will include the conference command center in Bristol, Tenn., VDH's Emergency Coordination Center in Richmond and several field dispensing sites throughout southwest Virginia. A schedule of open media events will be available Oct. 20 or you may call (804) 864-7008 to discuss any story needs you may have.

VDH requests your cooperation in arranging media needs ahead of time so as not to confuse actual media representatives with mock media taking place as part of the exercise.